

# Pianist as Portrayer of Imagery in “En Sourdine” by Fauré and Debussy

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THE TWO MASTERS OF FRENCH ART SONG, Gabriel Fauré and Claude Debussy, exerted considerable influence on the succeeding generation in *mélodie* composition and consolidated a distinguished path away from the German form. Their distinct styles and attraction to the works of Paul Verlaine, a French symbolist poet, have stimulated scholars' interest in comparing their individual techniques of setting poetry to music and interpretations of the same poetic verses. While acknowledging the distinguished styles of the two composers, these comparative studies almost exclusively conclude that Debussy takes a literary approach to the text, whereas Fauré attempts to create an atmosphere that captures the overall sentiment of the poem. In his remarks on Debussy's setting of Verlaine's "En sourdine," for instance, Pierre Bernac contends: "As usual Debussy, in setting these beautiful love poems, follows much more closely than Fauré the meaning of each line and even of each word."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Gerald Moore's preference for Debussy's version of this poem is influenced by the composer's literary approach and "magical setting of the words."<sup>2</sup> And after examining settings of Verlaine's "Il pleure dans mon coeur," "Green," and "C'est l'extase" by Fauré and Debussy, Laurence Porter concludes that "Fauré, in short, is a musician; Debussy is part musician, part poet . . . [Debussy] once said that his dream was a perfect union of music with the text. Fauré had no such ambition."<sup>3</sup>

This article aims to demonstrate that Fauré employs unique technique to unify music and words in Verlaine's "En sourdine"—and indeed stays as close to the text as Debussy. Overflowing with imagery, "En sourdine" inspires both composers to approach the images from different angles and to use the piano to portray imagery, suggesting emotions that contrast despite being derived from the same lines of text. As I will illustrate through musical analyses and an exploration of the compositional background below, the piano in Fauré's setting depicts the visual images from the poem and highlights the motion it describes, projecting a hopeful mood. Debussy, on the other hand, dwells on the aural aspect of the imagery, creating an atmosphere that is both melancholy and still. My analytic focus will be on harmony, melody, figuration, and texture, rather than on word setting. I also will provide performance guides for pianists based on the findings from the musical analyses.

## IMAGERY IN "EN SOURDINE"

Fauré composed "En sourdine" in 1891. Debussy set the poem twice, first in 1882 and again in 1892. The version we are examining is the latter one, which

TABLE 1.

En sourdine	Muted
Calmes dans le demi-jour Que les branches hautes font, Pénétrons bien notre amour De ce silence profond.	Calm in the half light Created by the tall branches, Let our love be imbued With this deep silence.
Fondons nos âmes, nos cœurs Et nos sens extasiés, Parmi les vagues langueurs Des pins et des arbousiers.	Let us merge our souls, our hearts, And our ecstatic senses, With the hazy languors Of the pines and arbutus.
Ferme tes yeux à demi, Croise tes bras sur ton sein, Et de ton cœur endormi Chasse à jamais tout dessein.	Half close your eyes, Fold your arms across your breast, And from your sleeping heart Banish all intention forever.
Laissons-nous persuader Au souffle berceur et doux Qui vient, à tes pieds, rider Les ondes des gazons roux.	Let us surrender To the lulling, gentle breeze That comes to ruffle at your feet The waves of russet grass.
Et quand, solennel, le soir Des chênes noirs tombera Voix de notre désespoir, Le rossignol chantera.	And when, solemnly, evening Falls from the black oaks, The voice of our despair, The nightingale will sing.

demonstrates his more mature songwriting. Before analyzing these two musical settings, we should first review the poem in order to understand the story (Table 1).

The poem immerses readers in twilight and profound silence; the wind gently rustles the grass while everything else is hushed and still. In this quiet landscape, the poet reveals the privacy shared by two lovers through his use of personal language—“our love,” “our souls,” “our hearts and our ecstatic senses,” and toward the end of the piece, “our despair.”<sup>4</sup> The fusion of the lovers’ hearts with nature weaves through the poem. The words depict the natural images vividly, almost as if the reader were viewing an exquisite painting portraying the tall branches dimming the afternoon sun, the drowsy trees, the soothing breath of the wind at the lovers’ feet, the night falling from the black oaks, and the nightingale singing a despairing song. The poem gradually transitions from muted daylight and hopeful love in the first stanza to gloomy evening and despair in the last.<sup>5</sup>

Aural imagery, which is immediately suggested by the title “En sourdine” (Muted), permeates Debussy’s version. To capture the deep silence, Debussy evokes stillness through the use of long held chords, static lines, and repeated notes in *pianissimo*. Debussy’s emphasis on the

sonic component of the scenery is further manifested by his introduction of the nightingale’s melody (which does not come to the scene until the last stanza of the poem) in the very beginning of the piece (Example 1). After its first appearance, the nightingale’s song modulates through different registers and rhythmic variations and resonates with the lovers’ despair at the end. By repeating the nightingale motive, Debussy dwells on the melancholy of the latter portion of the poem and captures the emotional culmination evoked in the last stanza.

Fauré, by contrast, focuses on the visual imagery in the poem. He creates a dimly lit and subdued atmosphere through his choice of key, E<sup>b</sup> major. Vladimir Jankélévitch remarks on Fauré’s use of flat and sharp key tonalities to respectively depict dying light and arising dawn: “with Fauré, . . . there is an entire poetics of flat-key sonorities, which acts to filter light, giving expression to the penumbra, the half-tint, half-day.”<sup>6</sup> Contrary to the pervading stillness in Debussy’s setting, Fauré furnishes the quiet environment with the only object that is set in constant motion—a gentle breeze. The continuously flowing wind portrayed by the arpeggiated figuration in sixteenth notes begins the song and wanders through the entire piece, bringing

The musical score for "En Sourdine" by Debussy, measures 1-10, is presented in two systems. The first system shows the vocal line (CHANT) and the piano accompaniment (PIANO). The tempo is marked "Rêveusement lent". The piano part features a "Nightingale Motive" marked "pp" and "Doux et expressif". The lyrics are: "Cal-mes dans le". The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "de-mi-jour Que les bran-ches hau-tes font, Pé-nétrons bien notre a-mour De ce si-len-ce pro-fond. Toujours très doux". The piano part includes a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand and a triplet of eighth notes in the left hand.

Example 1. Debussy, “En sourdine,” mm. 1–10.

out the serenity of the scene with its ceaseless motion in the background (Example 2). These arpeggios not only set up the overall mood but also convey an important message at the end through their never ceasing motion: there is hope behind the nightingale’s voice of despair. (A similar figuration is also used to suggest an uplifting mood in Fauré’s “Allegresse” [Happiness], his only piano composition with a descriptive title [Example 3].) The impression of hope is reinforced by the last six bars of the E<sup>b</sup> major tonic pedal, which begins the song and continues for five measures while the poet is describing the subdued environment in which their love is imbued (Example 2). According to Graham Johnson’s thorough

study of Fauré’s choice of tonality in relation to subjects and ideas of his *mélodies*, E<sup>b</sup> major serves as the home key of songs that convey “comfort and calm intimacy, the trust and reciprocation between man and woman, between man and nature, or man and God . . .”<sup>7</sup> Fauré’s focus on the visual aspects of the poem’s imagery is further revealed by his musical visualization of the verbs in the poem as illustrated in the next section.

### ANALYSIS OF FAURÉ’S “EN SOURDINE” AND PERFORMANCE GUIDES

Within the ABA<sup>1</sup> structure (A: mm. 1–16; B: mm. 17–32; A<sup>1</sup>: mm. 33–47) of Fauré’s setting, there is only

Andante moderato. (♩ = 63) *dolce*

Cal - - - mes

*p*

*Ed.*

**E♭ pedal**

dans le de - mi - jour Que les bran - ches hau - tes

*Ed.* *Ed.* *Ed.* *Ed.*

*cresc.*

font, Pé - né - trons bien notre a - mour

*espressivo*

*Ed.* *Ed.* *Ed.* *Ed.* *Ed.* *Ed.* *Ed.*

Example 2. Fauré, "En sourdine," mm. 1-7.

Allegro giocoso ♩. 63

*p leggiero*

Example 3. Fauré, "Allegresse," mm. 1-2.

one tempo marking, *Andante moderato*. Evidently, Fauré intends this poem to be represented at a gentle flowing pace with the blowing of the zephyr creating an overarching atmosphere and imparting mobility to the music. The first five measures of the E♭ tonic pedal enhance the peaceful ambiance and immerse the listener in tender laziness (Example 2). To paint this picture and

evoke the sensation of grass ruffled by breezes, the pianist needs to use a gentle, soft touch to make the broken chord patterns absolutely smooth, even, and without accent. Playing the sixteenth notes with slow wrist rotation following the direction of the arpeggios and with the fleshy part of the fingers creates a warm sound imitating the tender breath of the zephyr. To portray the intensity



font, Pé-né-trons bien notre a-mour. *cresc.*

*espressivo*

*sempre* De ce si-len - ce pro-fond, Mèlons nos â - mes, *f* Nos cœurs.

In the deep silence

et nos sens ex - ta - si - és, *p* Par -

- mi les va - - gues lan - gueurs des pins *pp*

et des ar - bou-siers *pp*

*legato sempre* *dolcissimo*

V → I

Example 4. Fauré, “En sourdine,” mm. 5–16.

The musical score for Example 5, Fauré's "En sourdine," measures 17-20, is presented in two systems. The first system covers measures 17 and 18, with the vocal line singing "Fer - me tes yeux à de-mi, Croi - se tes bras" and the piano accompaniment providing a broken chord pattern in the right hand and a counter-melody in the left hand. The second system covers measures 19 and 20, with the vocal line singing "sur ton sein Et de ton cœur en-dor - mi Chas - se à ja -". The piano accompaniment continues with the broken chord pattern and counter-melody. Dynamics include *dolcissimo*, *pp*, *cresc.*, and *mf*. Pedal markings are present throughout.

Example 5. Fauré, "En sourdine," mm. 17–20.

of the act of lovemaking implied by the text, "Let us merge our souls, our hearts, and our ecstatic senses," the harmonic rhythm becomes more active in m. 6 and is heightened by a *crescendo* leading up to the first *forte* (voice) and *mezzo forte* (piano) in m. 10. Fauré achieves unstoppable momentum through smooth voice leading and stepwise motion in the bass, a compositional trait of Fauré's that Carlo Caballero observed in the composer's other vocal works.<sup>8</sup> The *crescendo* instruction and moving harmonic progression demonstrates Fauré's focus on the action in the poem rather than on its aural imagery: *De ce silence profond* (in the deep silence; Example 4). The piano's persona here (the poet's lover) for the first time has a countermelody marked *espressivo*, which constantly merges into, doubles, or pulls away from the vocal line. Fauré musically visualizes the sensual action using two intertwined, continuously rising and falling melodic lines. In mm. 5–14, the pianist should shape and voice the countermelody with a singing tone, while giving the bass notes gentle weight, particularly in places where the bass moves by step, to generate drive to "Nos coeurs" (our hearts), the climax of Section A. Saturated with "languor" after the act of love, the A section restfully ends with a descending vocal line on a cadence in *pianis-*

*simo*. Marked *dolcissimo*, the broken chord patterns in the piano in m. 16 should be rendered in *diminuendo* with the aide of the soft pedal to create warmth in the sound and set up the mood for the upcoming section (Example 4).

Section B starts with the lovers' intimate conversation where the poet requests her in a *dolcissimo* tone to "half close her eyes," and the piano responds in the left hand with a three-note countermotive comprised of a falling third and rising second. Fauré musically visualizes the lovers facing each other by setting the piano's motive in the mirror image of the singer's (Example 5). To respond to the vocal part, the left hand makes a slight *crescendo* to G<sup>b</sup> and a *diminuendo* to A<sup>b</sup>.

The lover's image of drowsily laying in the breeze is depicted by the placement of the left hand's quarter notes below the broken chord figuration in the treble (Example 5). The sixteenth notes should be executed as gently as possible, with flat fingers staying close to the keys. In mm. 21–24, instead of keeping the dynamic soft to reflect "de ton coeur endormi" (from your *sleeping* heart), Fauré directs the attention to the verb "chasse" (banish, drive away). To send away all intention forever ("chasse à jamais tout dessein"), m. 21 makes a *crescendo* to *mezzo*

Example 6. Fauré, "En sourdine," mm. 20–24.

*forte* and starts a circle of fifths traveling from D $\flat$ , G $\flat$ , and C $\flat$ , to F, and ending in the foreign key of B $\flat$  minor in m. 24 (Example 6). The pianist holds down the successive notes that are in the same harmony to create an "overlegato" effect in addition to the use of the damper pedal, thus producing blocks of sound corresponding to the harmonic design rather than individual pitches.

The dynamic in mm. 24–30 needs to remain *pianissimo* throughout, suggesting that the piano submissively follows her lover's requests by gently repeating the vocal line in mm. 17–20 (see Example 5) at an interval of a fifth higher (Example 7). Reflecting the verb "persuader" (surrender), the vocal line gradually descends an interval of a sixth from D $\flat$  to F in mm. 25–26. It is also noteworthy that mm. 24–26 is the only place in this song where the arpeggiated figuration forms an expansive arch encompassing two measures from B $\flat_1$  to D $\flat_5$ , a dramatic metaphor for the poem's suggestion that the lovers both surrender to the lulling breeze and are embraced by it. The left hand delicately shapes the sixteenth notes according to the arch form.

Starting from m. 28, the right hand makes an almost imperceptible *crescendo* from the first to the second quarter note and delicately leans on the repeated F $\flat$ s,

eventually initiating a descending line that suggests the fall of evening and leads the song to its climax (Example 8). The bass notes, rhythmically displaced against the piano's top voice, form another descending line in mm. 30–33 following a short one in mm. 27–29. Fauré's visual approach to the poem is clearly illustrated with his emphasis on the verb "tombera" (fall), depicting the arrival of evening rather than underlining the acoustic silence normally associated with night in the poetry. The sixteenth notes in m. 32 should be rendered expansively and stretched slightly to invite the "solemn evening," the religious, hopeful character of which is strongly conveyed by a *forte* dynamic, *espressivo* marking, and an authentic cadence to the home key of E $\flat$  major. (As mentioned earlier in regard to Example 8, the key of E $\flat$  major represents for Fauré belief in God or trust between lovers.) Instead of following the traditional procedure of starting the reprise with the tonic, Faure delays the cadential point leading to the tonic two measures later to underscore the night's arrival. From mm. 32–35, the pianist uses arm rotation to produce a rich, resonant sound with special attention to the downbeats of m. 33 and m. 35 (B $\flat$  major dominant to E $\flat$  major tonic).

The musical score for Fauré's "En sourdine" (measures 23-28) is presented in three systems. Each system contains a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature has two flats (B-flat major), and the time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are: "- mais tout des - sein. Lais - - - sons-nous per - su - a - der. Au souf - fle ber - ceur et doux Qui". The piano accompaniment features arpeggiated chords in the right hand and repeated notes in the left hand. Dynamics include *p*, *pp*, and *dolce*. There are also markings for "Red." and "\*" below the piano part.

Example 7. Fauré, "En sourdine," mm. 23–28.

The evening starts the last stanza in *forte*, and Fauré sets "voice of our despair" in a declamatory style with repeated notes on *sempre f* and intensifies "désespoir" with an E diminished seventh chord. The dynamic drops from *p* to *pp* after the statement, bringing us back to the sweet, tender, floating mood (Example 9). To be sensitive to the low vocal register on the last two beats of m. 37, the pianist should voice toward the left hand with emphasis on the E diminished seventh chord and render the right hand part with a *mezzo piano* dynamic. Evoking "our despair" through *forte* and a diminished harmony, the nightingale's despairing song that constitutes the prime focus in Debussy's setting, however, is never "heard."

Jankélévitch states that "the melody of [Fauré's] 'En sourdine' is coextensive with Verlaine's poem and nevertheless does not tangle itself up in the details of the text,

preferring to drown them in the unvarying *pianissimo* of the arpeggios, in the penumbra, in the end taking no account of the nightingale's singing."<sup>9</sup> Examined closely, Fauré's rendition does trace the details of the text in setting "Le rossignol chantera" (The nightingale will sing) by, again, concentrating on the action in portraying the imagery. A contrary motion coupled with a *diminuendo* from *piano* to *pianissimo* is created in mm. 39–41 by the outer voices in the piano symbolizing the nightingale's flying away and disappearing in the dark. The E<sup>b</sup> falling octave of the voice in mm. 42–43 on "chantera"—a rarely used device that Fauré favored as a "love motive"<sup>10</sup>—serenely bridges over the lovers' despair to the religious, hopeful character suggested by the "solemn evening" (Example 9). To depict the scene, the pianist listens for the increasing intervals between the two diverging lines

souf - fle ber - ceur et doux Qui  
 vient, à tes pieds, ri - der Les on - des des  
 ga - zons roux.  
 Et quand, so - len - nel, le soir Des chê - nes noirs tom - be.

Example 8. Fauré “En sourdine,” mm. 27–35.

in mm. 39–41 and employs a smooth *diminuendo* in these three measures. This prepares the singer for the last word, “chantera” (sing), to be sung in complete serenity.

Fauré sets “En sourdine” in motion through his use of a single, gently moving tempo (*Andante moderato*) and the piano’s arpeggios in sixteenth notes, which embody the continuously flowing zephyr. Focusing on the visual imagery rather than the acoustic aspects of the text, the piano musically visualizes key verbs including those

in “merge our souls,” “banish your intention forever,” and “the evening falls from the dark oak trees.” This is accomplished through the use of active contrapuntal lines, a fast harmonic progression, the circle of fifths, descending lines, and crescendos. The resulting effect diverges from the quietness of the poem’s aural imagery.

That Fauré intended his setting of “En sourdine” to convey a hopeful character is also supported by the composer’s own commentaries. Finished on June 20,

- ra, *espressivo* Voix de no - tre dé - ses.  
 Voice of our despair

- poir, *p* Le ros - si - gnol

*p sempre*

*pp sempre* chan - - - te - ra...

*dim.* *sempre pp*

**Example 9. Fauré, “En sourdine,” mm. 36–47.**

1891, “En sourdine” is placed second in the order of a set named *Cinq mélodies*, Op. 58, based on five Verlaine poems. The thematic connections between “En sourdine,” “Green” (No. 3), and “C’est l’extase” (No. 5) make these songs a cyclic work: a story that develops a psychological journey starting out with happiness (No. 2) moving on to conflicted feelings (No. 3) and ending with despair (No. 5). Fauré wrote of the mixed emotions in “Green” (No. 3) in a letter accompanying the

manuscript of the song to Winnaretta Singer (Princess Polignac), the dedicatee of the song cycle.

Have I succeeded in transposing this wonderful canticle of adoration? I don't know. Don't destroy it with your two white hands, and if you don't like it at first sight, will you promise me not to lose heart, but read it through again? It's difficult to interpret: slow moving but agitated in feeling, happy and miserable, eager and discouraged! What a lot in thirty bars!<sup>11</sup>

Example 10. Fauré, “C’est l’extase,” mm. 32–40.

And as a commentary to Winnaretta in September 1891 along with the score of the fifth song reveals:

[In “C’est l’extase,”] after the opening theme, which doesn’t recur, I introduce for the second stanza a return of “Green,” now calm, and restful, and for the third one a return of “En sourdine,” now a cry of frustration, even deeper and more intense right up to the end. It forms a kind of conclusion and makes these five songs into a sort of *Suite*, a story.<sup>12</sup>

The motive depicting the intimate conversation between the lovers after their lovemaking in “En sourdine” (see Example 5) is transformed to represent “a cry of frustration” in “C’est l’extase” through the use of intense dynamic markings: *forte*, *sf*, and accent. The lovers here are shouting out: “This soul, which bemoan and

weep, and this dormant lament, it is ours, is it not?” (Example 10). The emotions Fauré describes in these three songs might be reflective of the composer’s developing feelings for Winnaretta, first disclosed in a letter to his friend dated June 12th, 1891, during his stay in Venice with Winnaretta and other mutual friends.

But what a place! And what a life we are living here! Divine doesn’t cover it: let’s just say there’s no word for it! Nor is there a word to express the extent of the admiration and almost something more (ouch) that I feel for our adorable hostess! A parenthesis at this point! BUT YOU MUST SWEAR NOT TO GIVE ME AWAY! Not that it makes any difference since we are going home soon and it will all be over! But Venice I am finding morally DELETERIOUS!!!



CHANT *Rêveusement lent*

PIANO *Nightingale Motive* *Doux et expressif* *pp*

Cal-mes dans le

de-mi-jour Que les bran-ches hau-tes font, Pé-nétrons bien notre a-

-mour De ce si-len-ce pro-fond

*Toujours très doux*

Example 11. Debussy, “En sourdine,” mm. 1–10.

But it's true what you told me: our princess is exquisite on closer acquaintance. She's so original in everything she does, with a real aptitude for so many intelligent things, and so charmingly good-humoured and so kind! I'm really very, very fond of her.<sup>13</sup>

This letter was written one week before the completion of “En sourdine.” Fauré's projection of Winnaretta onto the song cycle is further revealed in a letter of July 1891 where the composer requested Winnaretta not to destroy the manuscript of “Green” “with her two white hands.” These words are quoted from the first stanza of the poem where the poet asks his lover “not to tear with her two white hands his heart, which beats only for her.” These clues from the composer's letters, his remarks on

the emotional transformation of “En sourdine” to a cry of frustration in “C'est l'extase,” as well as the previous analytic findings confirm the hopeful character and happiness Fauré intends to convey in his setting of “En sourdine,” which contrasts with the melancholic sentiment that pervades Debussy's version.

### ANALYSIS OF DEBUSSY'S “EN SOURDINE” AND PERFORMANCE GUIDES

In contrast to the uninterrupted gently moving pace in Fauré's setting, Debussy's focus on the stillness of the poetic environment is revealed by his tempo markings: Section A (mm. 1–17)—*Rêveusement lent* (dreamily slow); Section B (mm. 18–31)—*En animant un peu*



(a little animated); Section A<sup>1</sup> (mm. 32–43)—*Un peu plus lent-Lent* (a little slower-slow). The piano prelude introduces the bird’s despairing song, emphasizing G<sup>#</sup> with *tenuto* markings and a descending pentatonic scale accompanied by an E<sup>#</sup> half-diminished seventh chord. This immediately immerses the listener in a melancholy mood that is further enhanced by unfulfilled harmonic expectation (Example 11). Despite the key signature of B major, Debussy sets up a longing for F<sup>#</sup> major by repeating the E<sup>#</sup> half-diminished chord three times in the first five measures. This expectation, intensified by the C<sup>#</sup> seventh chord in m. 7, is denied by the D<sup>#</sup> minor triad bitterly set on “amour” (love) in m. 8. The avoidance of a cadential arrival, the *pianissimo* dynamic, the singer’s static line consisting mainly of repeated D<sup>#</sup>s, and the block chords in three or six beats that accompany the nightingale motive all combine to evoke motionlessness and profound silence. Meanwhile, a mysterious and hypnotic character emanates from the domineering syncopated rhythm in both the vocal and piano parts.

To create the muted and static mood, the chords in mm. 1–9 should be rendered with a slow touch, flat fingers, and gentle arm rotation. The G<sup>#</sup> in the nightingale motive should be played with focused fingertips to execute the *tenuto* marks. Feeling the metrical subdivision, the pianist needs to resist any temptation to move the tempo forward when playing the motive and take the hairpin marks as phrasing indications rather than dynamic instructions. As the nightingale motive recurs throughout the A section and progressively moves to a lower register, the melancholic atmosphere steadily thickens. While the singer is resting in “the profound silence” in m. 10, the pianist relaxes the tempo, enhancing the haziness of the scene.

Setting the words “Let us merge our souls . . . and our ecstatic senses” in a faster harmonic rhythm, Debussy depicts the lovers’ sensual tension by using augmented seventh chords. However, they maintain the dotted-half rhythm as before, incorporating none of the motion that Fauré uses to portray the same scene (Example 12). Though marked *peu à peu animé*, mm. 11–14 project a sense of rhythmic resistance between the piano’s top voice and vocal line resulting from syncopation and two against three. The vocal part continually swings back to G<sup>#</sup> on all occurrences of “nos” (our) to heighten the intensity. Finally the voice breaks through with a

big leap and sings the last syllable of “extasiés” on D<sup>#</sup><sub>5</sub>, the highest note so far in the song, implying the climax and rapture following the act of love. The harmonic resolution of the E-major triad in m. 14 helps relieve the tension accumulated by the augmented seventh chords in mm. 11–13. The E-major chord, however, is immediately replaced by a G<sup>#</sup>-minor chord which creates a three-measure pedal and ends the A section. This, as observed by Susan Taylor-Horrex, reflects the poem’s mood “of uneasy calm, a vision of happiness or pleasure that may be undermined at any moment.”<sup>14</sup> The act of love is sentimentalized by the fourth presentation of the nightingale motive. It is essential for the pianist to maintain the rhythmic tension between his/her top line and the vocal melody with a clearly pronounced *tenuto* touch while moving the tempo as the composer instructs. Though the increasingly intense harmony in mm. 11–12 inspires one to play them with a *crescendo*, the pianist should resist the temptation and reserve it for m. 13 with the support of the ascending bass line (B-C<sup>#</sup>-D<sup>#</sup>-E) that leads to “extasiés.” After their ecstatic experience, the lovers’ laziness is reflected by a calm vocal line with repeated notes and “sighing” gestures in the piano (mm. 15–16), coupled with increasingly soft dynamics: *p*, *piu p* to *pp* (mm. 14–16). The first section demonstrates Debussy’s reliance on the acoustic quality of the poem’s imagery, creating a quiet environment and suggesting stillness rather than motion with repeated notes, long held chords, and rhythmic resistance.

In the B section, the scene becomes more active as the poet asks his lover to half close her eyes and drive away all purpose from her sleeping heart while the gentle wind ruffles the grass at their feet. This part, thus, is characterized by a faster tempo, a gently rocking motion produced by triplet figures in the piano, and a moving vocal line. There should, however, be no sense of hurry or agitation. The piano’s triplets are presented in legato with an almost imperceptible *crescendo* and *diminuendo* in each measure (mm. 18–23; Example 13). In mm. 18–21, Debussy hints at melancholy by introducing appoggiaturas underlined with a *tenuto* marking. These first appear in the bass in the first two measures (Examples 13 and 14). There are, however, a few more appoggiaturas hidden behind the triplets that further enhance the melancholy mood (Example 15). To convey sadness and create contrapuntal layers, the pianist uses voicing technique to gently

*Peu à peu animé*  
*p*

Fon - dons nos â - mes, nos cœurs Et nos sens ex - ta -

*p Rit.* **1<sup>er</sup> Mouvt.**

- siés Par - mis les vagues langueurs Des pins et des ar - bou - siers.

*p* *più p* *pp*

EM G#m

Example 12. Debussy, "En sourdine," mm. 11-16.

**En animant un peu**

Fer - me tes yeux à de - mi, Croi - se tes

*p* *Délicatement*

bras sur ton, sein, Et de ton cœur en - dor -

*poco cresc.*

Example 13. Debussy, "En sourdine," mm. 17-22.

CHANT

PIANO

*pp Doux et expressif*

*Rêveusement lent*

Example 14. Debussy, “En sourdine,” mm. 1–2.

bring out those appoggiaturas while giving each layer a different tone color, keeping the fingers playing the appoggiaturas at a more vertical angle and the others flat. Embodied in the piano’s continuous broken chord patterns in triplets in both hands at the treble as well as a faster harmonic rhythm, the gentle zephyr in mm. 26–31 takes the song to the end of section B (Example 16). To depict “the waves of reddish lawn,” a slight *crescendo* and a *diminuendo* are applied in each measure in mm. 26–28. The pianist must make perfect legato and move his/her hands horizontally between the chords to imitate the soothing wind. The oscillated motion of the broken chords retains the hypnotic feeling and stillness from section A, never yielding to the vivid movement of Fauré’s setting.

Once again, Debussy accomplishes the transition from the “half-daylight” to the evening by emphasizing the acoustic rather than visual qualities of the imagery (fall of the evening). While the listener hears the haunting nightingale song coming back in an increasingly slow tempo (*Un peu plus lent*) and soft dynamic level, the wind evoked by the triplets begins to whisper in

the middle voice (mm. 32–34), eventually ceasing and giving way to the gloom of the evening and the lovers’ despair (Example 16). The required smoothness of the triplets can be achieved through the use of flat, soft fingers, and the supporting chords should be rolled gently before the beat to allow the triplets to flow at an even pace. The rhythmic resistance of two against three in the piano in m. 31 should be evident, and helps the pianist gradually slow down the tempo before bringing back the nightingale’s song in m. 32.

Debussy stresses the despair of the two lovers by setting the last sentence, “Voice of our despair, the nightingale will sing,” on a descending line and placing a D<sup>#</sup> major triad against E in the bass in m. 37 (Example 17). Both singer and pianist should linger on this chord slightly before moving on, reinforcing the word that it colors, “désespoir,” with time rather than volume. Debussy’s focus on the aural aspect is demonstrated again by his reservation of the highest pitch of the song (F<sup>#</sup><sub>5</sub>) for “voix” (voice). The piano postlude presents the nightingale motive in *piu pp*, the softest dynamic in the song, deepening the silence of the evening and echoing the melancholic sentiment of the poem. The chords underneath demand a slow touch with the bottom voice slightly emphasized to introduce the only cadence in the home key, which, however, does not deliver a perfect resolution. The B major tonic in the last two measures is sentimentalized by G<sup>#</sup>, the pitch that begins the nightingale’s song. True happiness is not achieved. The pianist plays the last presentation of the motive with absolute calmness and a gentle touch, making a *diminuendo* to *ppp* in the last three measures to create soundless serenity in the dark night.

17

En animant un peu

Fer-me tes yeux à de-mi, Croi-se tes

*p Dûcilement*

Example 15. Debussy, “En sourdine,” mm. 17–19.

*Intimentement doux*

Lais - sons - nous per - su - a - der Au

*Poco cresc.*

souf - fle ber - ceur et doux Qui vient à tes pieds ri -

*Poco cresc.*

*Un peu plus lent*

der Les on - des de ga - zon roux.

Nightingale motive

*Dim.*

*p*

Et quand so - len - nel, le soir, Des chê - nes

*più p*

Example 16. Debussy, "En sourdine," mm. 26-34.

Stillness permeates and enhances the quietness of the scenery in Debussy's version, which highlights the sonic aspect of the imagery (deep silence in the half daylight, the nightingale song, and fall of the solemn night) by employing static vocal lines, chords of long values, and a pervasive soft dynamic. The nightingale's song, which

accompanies the lovers from the afternoon to the evening, culminates the melancholic sentiment of the poem. The unfulfilled harmonic expectation, postponement of cadence, and superimposition of G<sup>#</sup> on the tonic at the end also contribute to a feeling of gloom. Debussy's sentimental and unhopeful interpretive approach to the

Example 17. Debussy, “En sourdine,” mm. 35–43.

poem is further evidenced in his treatment of “Colloque sentimental,” another poem from Verlaine’s *Fêtes galantes*. Though that poem makes no mention of a nightingale, Debussy uses the nightingale’s song from “En sourdine” to represent love’s frustration and pessimism. The motive repeats multiple times to “accompany the female phantom’s futile reminiscences” (Example 18). As Susan Youens comments, “the tale is not of love, but of alienation and the mutual incomprehensibility of men and women, the impossibility of love.”<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSION

By comparing these two musical settings of the same poem, this article aims to shed light on the different approaches of Fauré and Debussy to the imagery in “En

sourdine,” as well as how they use the piano to portray that imagery and thus unify music and text. Focusing on the acoustic elements of the imagery, Debussy creates a muted, motionless environment through the use of slow tempos and harmonic rhythm, long held chords, and a pervasive soft dynamic. The pessimistic melancholia emanating from unfulfilled harmonic expectations and the nightingale’s despairing song shrouds the lovers from the drowsy afternoon to the dark night. In contrast to the melancholy and stillness that pervade Debussy’s version, Fauré embraces the listener with ever-flowing breezes from the piano and emphasizes the poem’s action through intertwined melodic lines, cadential arrivals, and fast harmonic rhythm. Even though Fauré’s and Debussy’s settings were finished only one year apart, we have seen that the similarities between the two are

**a Tempo**

Ton cœur bat - il tou-jours à mon seul  
 "Hear-ing me named your blood would fast-er

**a Tempo**

nom? Tou-jours vois - tu mon âme en rê - ve? — Non.  
 run. Does e - ven mem' ry wake no e - choes?" — None.

Example 18. Debussy, "Colloque sentimental," mm. 27–31.

few. The fusion between music and literature that these pieces create leaves ample room for an expanded range of possible artistic interpretation.

## NOTES

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12. Jean-Michael Nectous, ed., *Gabriel Fauré: His Life Through His Letters*, trans. J. A. Underwood (New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1984), 179.
13. *Ibid.*, 173–174.
14. Susan Taylor-Horrex, *Verlaine: Fête galantes and Romances sans paroles* (Havertown: Grant & Cutler, 1988), 46.
15. Susan Youens, "Debussy's Song Cycles," *The NATS Bulletin* 53, no. 1 (September/October 1986): 14.

Praised by *World Journal, Chicago* for her "amazing playing," "symphonic, expansive texture of breathless virtuosity" (Historical Keyboard Society), and her Schumann performance, in which "the music comes to life in a new way" (Early Music America), pianist **Chi-Chen Wu** has appeared as recitalist, chamber musician, and concerto soloist in the United States, Canada, France, Italy, Spain, Japan, Taiwan, China, the Aspen Music Festival, Monadnock Music Festival, Boston Early Music Festival Fringe Concert Series, among others. Her concerts have been broadcast on NPR's *Simply Grand Concert Series* and *NPR-From The Top* in Boston. Musicians and conductors with whom she has concertized include Karl-Heinz Steffens, Jonathan McPhee, Zuill Bailey, mem-

bers of the Juilliard String Quartet, Takács String Quartet, musicians from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra as well as New York Philharmonic.

A native of Taiwan and prize winner of several Taiwanese national piano competitions, Wu came to the United States for graduate study and received two master's degrees in piano performance and collaborative piano, and a doctorate from New England Conservatory (NEC), where her teachers included Jacob Maxin, Irma Vallecillo, John Moriarty, Kayo Iwama, and John Greer. She has also worked with Thomas Quasthoff, Martin Katz, Kim Kashkashian, Lawrence Lesser, and Gabriel Chodos. Upon her graduation from NEC with Distinction in Performance and Academic Honors, she was appointed Assistant Professor at National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU). In addition to her teaching duties at NTNU, she also served as coordinator of collaborative piano study and developed the graduate program's curriculum.


In 2007, Dr. Wu accepted a position of visiting scholar at Cornell University, where she taught piano, studied fortepiano with Malcolm Bilson, and conducted research on historical performance practice with Neal Zaslaw. Continuing with her research interests, in the summer of 2011 she presented a research paper on Schumann's metronome markings at World Piano Conference in Serbia. This paper received Diploma of Excellence from the World Piano Teachers Association, the highest accolade of this organization.

An interpreter of contemporary music, Chi-Chen Wu was the official pianist of Aggregate, a Boston-based composers group and was pianist in the premier of the piano version of John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby*.

She world premiered *The Poet and The War* by Norbert Palej and recently performed as soloist in Piano Concerto No. 2 by Malcolm Williamson.

As a recording artist, Chi-Chen's album of the complete Schumann sonatas for piano and violin won two Gold Medals from the Global Music Awards and was named in the Top 10 "Best Classical Recordings of 2015" on The Big City, New York, which included the New York Philharmonic. Her recording of Schumann's *Fantasie* and *Carnaval* was released in 2017. She has recorded Haydn lieder on a replica of Walter fortepiano with soprano Andrea Folan for Musica Omnia. Her recital and discussion on piano collaboration are featured on the DVD *Performing the Score* released in 2011. Projects in this academic year include a recording of Schumann piano works, a Beethoven cycle with violinist Gregory Maytan, and concert tours in Massachusetts, Michigan, Colorado, and Oregon.

Dr. Wu is assistant professor of piano and coordinator of collaborative piano at the University of Wyoming. Her students have been prizewinners in numerous competitions, including the northwest division of the MTNA competition, and have been accepted for graduate study to the Juilliard School, New England Conservatory, McGill University, and Conservatoire de Paris, and other such institutions. She was selected as one of the Top 10 Teachers of 2017 in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Wyoming. During the summer, she is artist-faculty at the Killington Music Festival in Vermont. Dr. Wu is currently President of Wyoming Music Teachers Association and is represented by Great Lakes Performing Artist Associates.



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